Bullfrog HMA
Wild Burro Gather
Questions and Answers

Bullfrog HMA Gather

About the Bullfrog HMA wild burros.

Wild burros evolved in arid regions of Africa and Europe in habitat similar to the Bullfrog HMA. Their generalized browsing food habits gave them the ability to survive on poorer quality forage and very little water relative to wild horses. Contrasting from wild horses, wild burros may survive during droughts on very dry, shrub dominated sites with little grass, if resource competition is limited. However, the climate, vegetation, soils, and precipitation of the HMA all combine to make an extremely harsh hot desert landscape in the driest state in the U.S.

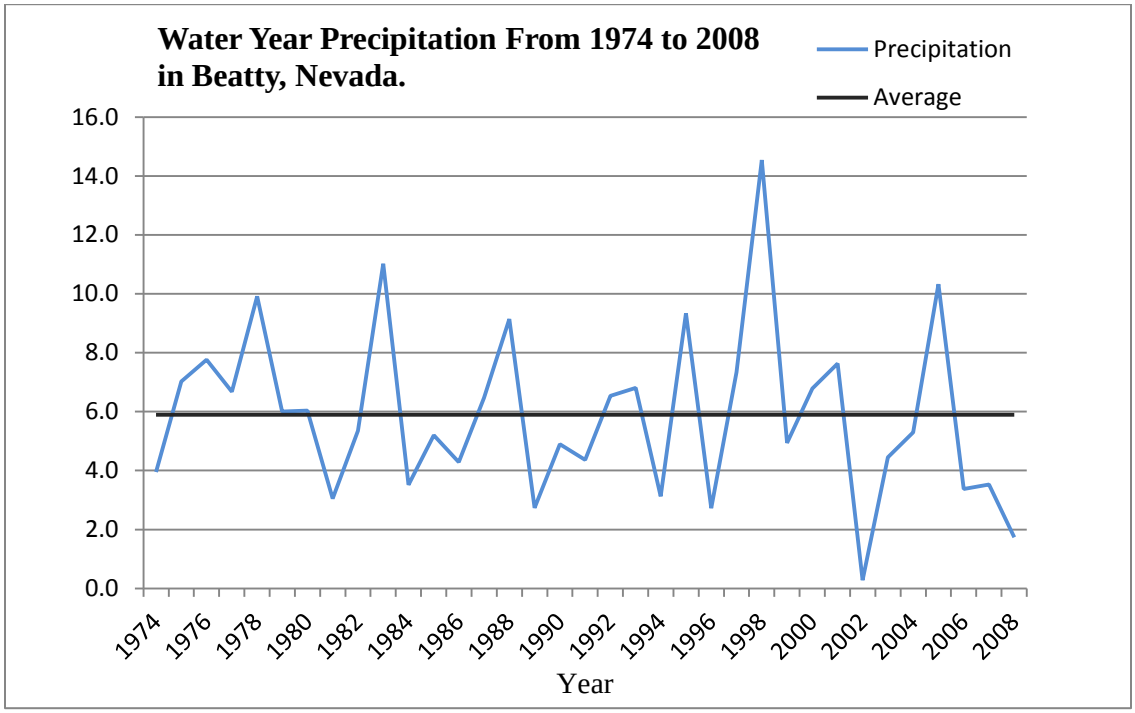
About the Bullfrog HMA and description of the environment.

The Bullfrog HMA is located in the southernmost portion of the Tonopah Field Office (TFO) area, and is approximately 151,782 acres. The eastern edge of the HMA borders the Nevada Testing and Training Range (NTTR), where burros move easily between both areas. The southern and western borders are synonymous with the TFO area boundary. The southern border is adjacent the BLM Southern Nevada District, and the western border neighbors Death Valley National Park. The town of Beatty, Nevada lies in the center of the HMA, and Highway 95 splits the HMA into eastern and western portions.

The area is characterized by Mojave Desert vegetation, dominated by blackbrush (*Coleogyne ramosissima)*, desert needlegrass (*Achnatherum speciosum)*, Indian ricegrass (*Achnatherum hymenoides)*, Nevada ephedra (*Ephedra nevadensis)*, burro brush *(Ambrosa dumosa)*, creosote bush *(Larrea tridentate)*, and fourwing saltbrush (*Atriplex canescensa)*. Elevations within the HMA range from a high of 6,031 feet at Bare Mountain to a low of 3,095 feet south of Beatty. The area receives little precipitation, typical of the Mojave Desert Ecosystem.

Extremes in precipitation from year to year tend to be more pronounced in southern Nye County than in northern Nevada or southern Nevada because this region is influenced by an orographic rain shadow of the California Sierra and by two different weather patterns (Continental Tropical and Maritime Polar). This causes highly variable precipitation, by year and by season (Figure 1). The effect of drought on this area can be pronounced when both weather patterns are weak for their respective traditional season. Likewise, rainfall well in excess of "normal" can result from a strong winter (maritime) pattern followed by a strong summer (continental) pattern. Soils and vegetation within the region reflect the dry conditions.

Figure 1. Water year (October 1 – September 30) precipitation near Beatty Nevada from 1974 to 2008. Data succeeding 2008 was unavailable. Notice the extreme fluctuations in precipitation.



Why is the BLM gathering the Bullfrog HMA?

The purpose of the Proposed Action is to remove wild burros from outside of the boundaries of the Bullfrog HMA, and remove excess wild burros from inside the boundaries of the HMA. This action is needed to remove wild burros from non-HMA areas not designated for their use, and to remove excess wild burros from within the HMA in accordance with the established AML. Furthermore, the action is needed 1) to protect rangeland resources from deterioration associated with an overpopulation of wild burros, and 2) to restore and maintain a thriving natural ecological balance and multiple-use relationship on the public lands consistent with the provisions of Section 3(b) (2) of the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971 (WFRHBA).

The post foaling populations will increase to an estimated 144 wild burros within and outside of the Bullfrog HMA based on an average annual increase of 16%, which exceed the established low AML by 86 wild burros and high AML by 53 wild burros. Based on a review of information available at this time, the TFO has determined that excess wild burros are present within and outside of the Bullfrog HMA. Removing excess wild burros would be in compliance with the WFRHBA. The gather would also achieve a population of wild burros consistent with the established AML, 1) protect the wild burros from declining body condition and poor health due to a lack of forage and water, 2) restore a thriving natural ecological balance and prevent degradation of rangeland resources resulting from an overpopulation of wild burros, 3) protect habitat for the threatened desert tortoise and the sensitive Amargosa toad, and 4) to decrease or

eliminate public safety concerns regarding wild burros in Beatty and along the Highway 95 corridor. This assessment is based on factors including, but not limited to the following rationale:

- The 2010 aerial inventory documented wild burro populations exceeding the established AML, with numerous wild burros residing outside the HMA boundary.
- Recurrent drought and sporadic precipitation patterns occur within the region often resulting in unfavorable conditions for healthy wild burros.
- Available water in the HMA is limited to wild burros, and much of the available water also provides habitat of the Amargosa toad, a special status species.
- Much of the HMA is identified as desert tortoise habitat, a federally threatened species.
- Excess wild burros have contributed to some of the Standards and Guidelines for Rangeland Health not being met in accordance with the Mojave-Southern Great Basin Resource Advisory Council (RAC; 2006), particularly where use is occurring outside of the HMA boundaries. The AML for the Bullfrog HMA must be maintained for continued progress towards the Standards and Guidelines for Rangeland Health in and Tonopah Resource Management Plan (RMP) Objectives.
- History of emergency gathers in the region (1996).
- History of poor wild burro health and Henneke body condition scores of 3 (thin) or less.
- Wild burros are wandering onto U.S. Highway 95 through the town of Beatty causing collisions with motorists, resulting in a public safety hazard. Multiple collisions per week have been reported.
- Many wild burros are residing inside the town of Beatty, Nevada searching for forage and water, creating hazards to citizens of Beatty, pets, motorists, and property damage. Burros residing in town and their interaction with the urban environment could threaten the health and overall well-being of the wild burros and public safety.
- The Beatty and Sawtooth fires burned 16,408 acres in 2006. Approximately 650 acres were drilled and seeded with desert wheatgrass *(Agropyron desertorum)* as part of the Fire Emergency Stabilization and Rehabilitation project. The seeding was evaluated for 3 years and the project was considered a failure. Forage resources remain extremely limited in these burned areas.

Further, the 2007 Rangeland Health Evaluation for the Montezuma Complex thoroughly describes several of the aforementioned issues specific to the Bullfrog HMA. They include:

1. Extremely high burro numbers in the past led to emergency gathers.
2. There are few available water sources, especially on the east side of the HMA.
3. Inadequate fencing around Beatty has led to burro-human interactions ("Nuisance burros").
4. Bullfrog HMA contains habitat for the threatened Desert tortoise.

What is the Proposed Action and other alternatives considered in the Preliminary Environmental Assessment (EA)?

The Proposed Action was developed to meet the Purpose and Need (i.e. to remove excess wild burros, manage wild burros within identified HMA boundaries, maintain AML and ensure a

thriving natural ecological balance). Alternatives 1 and 2 considered the two important issues identified by the Montezuma Complex RHE, BLM personnel and local agencies, and numerous members of the public.

Proposed Action: Gather and remove approximately 84 wild burros with those residing outside of the HMA and within the city limits of Beatty, NV having the highest priority for removal. Wild burros would also be removed from inside the HMA to achieve a post-gather population of 58 wild burros.

Through the Proposed Action, the primary goal would be to give removal priority to those wild burros residing in and near the town of Beatty, and outside of HMA boundaries. Wild burros would be removed from inside the HMA to achieve a post gather population of 58 wild burros (low AML). Approximately 84 wild burros would be removed during the gather to reach population objectives. Because no additional animals would be released, no age selection or population controls would be implemented.

Due to the mountainous terrain and poor sightability of burros, gather efficiency may be less than optimal. Population gather projections show that a 60% or greater gather efficiency is necessary to achieve the management goals. If gather efficiency is less than 60%, an insufficient number of wild burros may be gathered to achieve the low range of AML.

Alternative 1: Gather and remove wild burros from within 1 mile of Beatty, Nevada and the Highway 95 corridor through the HMA, concentrating on alleviating human-burro conflicts. The Bullfrog HMA would be gathered emphasizing Beatty and a one mile radius of Beatty. A one mile buffer to either side of the Highway 95 corridor through the HMA would also be selected. All wild burros found in these areas would be gathered and removed, potentially alleviating concerns of public safety hazards and human-burro conflicts. Wild burros residing outside of the described areas would not be gathered, and no attempt would be made to capture these animals. Due to movement patterns and seasonal distribution, it is difficult to predict how many wild burros could be captured and removed from these areas.

Alternative 2: Gather and remove wild burros from areas outside the designated HMA only, slowing expansion and decreasing pressure from wild burros in areas not designated for their use.

Under Alternative 2 wild burros would be gathered and removed from areas outside the designated HMA boundaries only. This would help slow the expansion of wild burros outside of the HMA, particularly south to Amargosa Valley (Lathrop Wells). It would also reduce the pressure on resources caused by wild burros using areas not designated for their use including but not limited to guzzlers implemented for desert bighorn sheep, critical habitat for desert tortoise, and public lands administered by the National Park Service. Due to movement patterns and seasonal distribution, it is difficult to predict how many wild burros could be captured and removed from outside HMA boundaries.

Alternative 3: No Action Alternative (No Wild Burro Gather)

Under the No Action Alternative, a wild burro gather would not be conducted in the Bullfrog HMA. Wild burro populations would not be actively managed at this time, and wild burros

would not be removed from areas outside of HMA boundaries. The current population of 144 wild burros would continue to increase at an estimated rate of 16% annually. The established AML would continue to be exceeded. Additionally, implementation of the No Action Alternative would not result in progress towards attainment of the RAC Standards and Guidelines for Rangeland Health, or Land Use Objectives for the affected allotment or HMA. Wild burro conflicts in Beatty, Nevada and public safety concerns along the Highway 95 corridor would continue and potentially increase as the wild burro population increases.

The No Action Alternative would not achieve the identified Purpose and Need in Section 1.3 of the EA. However, it is analyzed in this EA to provide a basis for comparison with the other action alternatives, and to assess the effects of not conducting a gather at this time. The No Action Alternative would not be consistent with the requirement under the WFRHBA to remove excess wild horses and burros from the public range, and is not in conformance with regulatory provisions for management of wild horses and burros as set forth at 43 CFR § 4700. The No Action Alternative would not result in achievement of the established AML or result in progress towards attainment of the RAC Standards and Guidelines for Rangeland Health, or Land Use Plan and RMP Objectives for the HMA or the involved allotment.

Where would the BLM gather wild burros?

Wild horses within the Bullfrog HMA would be gathered, as well as wild burros currently existing outside of designated HMAs in the vicinity of the Bullfrog HMA.

Will BLM remove all the wild burros that are gathered?

Yes. The proposal includes the capture and removal of excess wild burros, with wild burros residing outside the designated HMA having the highest priority for removal. Approximately 58 to 70 wild burros would remain in the Bullfrog HMA after the gather depending on capture efficiency. There will be no attempt to capture more wild burros once population objectives have been reached.

Will an adoption event be held at the gather?

The Tonopah Field Office may hold a small adoption event in conjunction with the Bullfrog HMA gather if enough interest is received by the public. These are known as "trap-site" adoptions. During these events, a small number of wild burros are marked and put into separate pens and offered for adoption by pre-qualified applicants. Once adopted, the wild burros are freeze-marked, vaccinated, dewormed and loaded into the adopter's stock trailers for transport home. All standard adoption requirements apply. These events allow adoption of wild burros and transport straight to their new homes without additional transport to BLM short term facilities and the added stress of additional handling.

What is the current population and AML of these HMAs?

The current AML for the Bullfrog HMA was established in 2007 through a Final Multiple Use Decision (FMUD) issued following completion of a Rangeland Health Evaluation (RHE) for the Montezuma Allotment Complex. The low and high AML for wild burros in the Bullfrog HMA is 58 to 91, respectively.

The most recent helicopter population inventory flight of the Bullfrog HMA was conducted in February, 2010 which resulted in a direct count of 124 wild burros. The anticipated post-foaling population in 2011 is 144 wild burros. However, due to the sightability of burros, it is expected that the current population estimate is lower than the actual number of burros within and outside of the HMA. An extensive inventory flight will take place in December 2011 in and outside the Bullfrog HMA to confirm population estimates and removal numbers. Gather and removal numbers are subject to change pending the results of this flight and will be reported in the Final Gather Plan EA.

Why is the post gather population goal at the low AML?

When establishing AMLs the BLM typically establishes an AML range. During gathers, the goal is to remove enough wild burros to reach the low end of the range, allowing the population to increase over the years. When the high range is exceeded, another gather would be scheduled. In the case of the Bullfrog HMA, the low AML is 58 wild burros.

Will the future genetic health of the Bullfrog HMA wild burros be harmed by the gather?

It is not expected that genetic viability or herd health would be affected by the proposed gather. Herd health and characteristics data would be collected as part of continued monitoring of the wild burro herds. Other data, including sex and age distribution, condition class information (using the Henneke rating system), color, size and other information may also be recorded for all gathered wild burros.

Baseline data would be collected to monitor the genetic health of the wild burros within the project area. If it is anticipated that genetic viability or herd health may be threatened, corrective and supplemental action may be taken by the BLM to ensure the future of the Bullfrog HMA wild burros.

How many Herd Management Areas are managed by the Battle Mountain District? How many acres?

The Battle Mountain District manages 28 Herd Management Areas that encompass about 3.6 million acres. There are approximately 4,300 wild horses and burros within the Battle Mountain District.

The BLM as a whole manages 180 Herd Management Areas that encompass approximately 32 million acres in ten western states.

How does the BLM select its gather contractors?

The BLM's national gather contracts were awarded in 2006 following an in-depth technical review of the proposals received from the prospective contractors. Among the key elements of the technical review was evaluation of the prospective contractor's knowledge, skill and ability to gather and handle wild horses and burros in a safe, effective and humane manner. The BLM's

contractors have demonstrated the knowledge, skill and ability to gather and handle these animals safely, effectively and humanely.

What contractor will be conducting the Stone Cabin Complex Gather?

Contractor to be appointed and is subject to change.